Discoveries

The bright sides of stumbling over a new bird species

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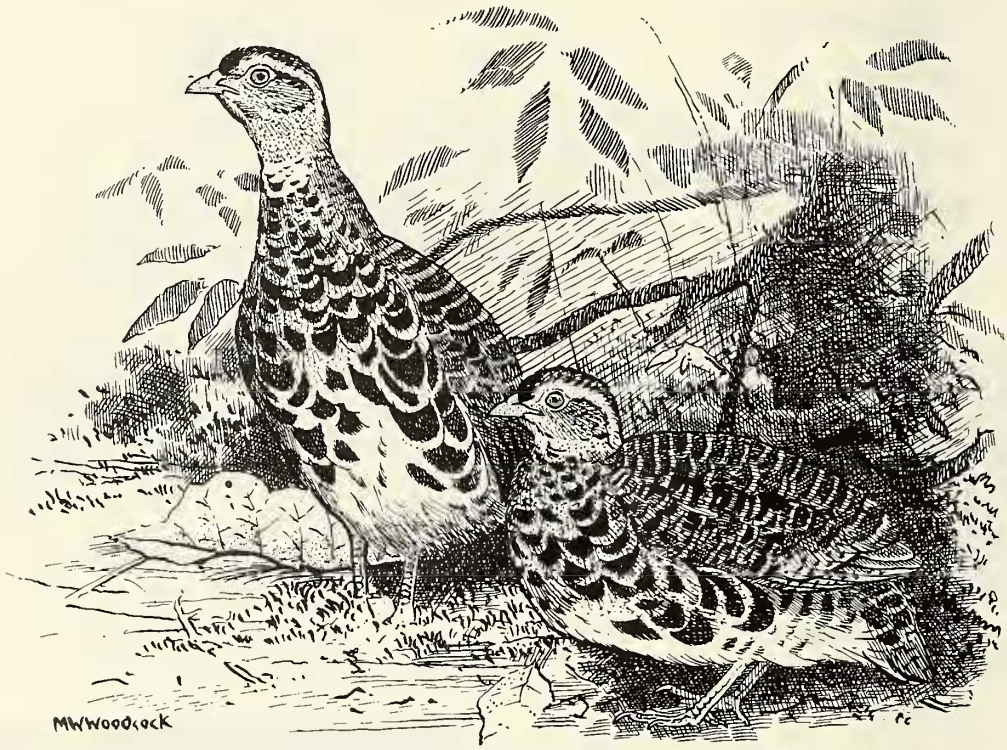

The newly described Udzungwa Forest Partridge *Xenoperdix udzungwensis*
by Martin Woodcock

On 4 June 1991 a new species of perdicine was discovered in montane forest in Tanzania. It turned out to be a distinct genus, with the closest relatives among the hill partridges in the Indo-Malayan region. The paper describing the species is to be found in *Ibis* 136: 2-11. This article gives you the unofficial background story.

Our first encounter with the species was quite remarkable and exciting as we saw only the feet of it. It was one of our first days in the forest, and we had already seen a couple of the rare species found in these endemic-rich Eastern Arc Mountain forests. Dusk forced us to go back to the camp, where we gathered around the fire discussing the day's experiences accompanied by the cawing turacos. Supper was, as always, a most welcome interruption. During the fight to get hold of the remaining bits of chicken, two small chicken-like feet suddenly appeared at the bottom of the pot. How did they end up there and what species did these 'spare parts' belong to? The guides from the local village, Udekwa, were smiling roguishly due to the white peoples' excitement and we knew by then that they were the promoters of this unexpected diet contribution.

It turned out that it had been caught in a snare just behind the camp. It was a 'kwale ndogo' (small perdicine bird), presumably some kind of francolin but not the Scaly Francolin, *Francolinus squamatus*, which was called 'kwale mkubwa' (big perdicine bird), and occurred on the forest edge and surrounding grassland. As the checklists of the Udzungwa Mts did not mention any forest-dwelling francolins or the like, we were very eager to get a closer look at this bird – preferably alive. During the next two days we caught only glimpses, but on the third day we saw a small flock at close range.

A subsequent comparison with descriptions and colour-plates in the field guides revealed that either we were suffering from the lack of thorough field guides or it was really something new. As the former was in fact the case we chose the cautious approach to the question and agreed upon calling it 'unsolved' until we had finished the first field period and got back to our hosts, Neil and Liz Baker, and their bird book library in Dar-es-Salaam. However, that did not stop our brains from puzzling with this mysterious 'kwale ndogo' while we were still in the forest and our curiosity was aroused every time we saw the bird. Was it a range extension, a strange morph, a new race or what?

On our way back to Dar-es-Salaam we were naturally bubbling with expectancy like a shaken bottle of champagne. The cork went off next morning as we were unable to find anything like it in the literature. The people of Mbezi Beach got an abrupt awakening by the sound of 'ornithooligans' yelling, bawling, jumping – the pack of Danes were back with a major discovery!

The task during the second field period was then to get specimens of the new bird necessary for publishing a species. Even though we caught more than 1000 birds of about 58 species in mist nets, we did not manage to catch one single 'kwale ndogo' – a few times they walked into the net but walked out again two seconds later. This job surely required experts and we asked the guides to try to do the trick again with their snares. Luckily they were successful as they caught both a male and a female. Now we had the proof.

In order to get the specimens legally out of Tanzania to make a thorough description and cladistic analysis we had to obtain a trophy certificate from the CITES-office in Dar-es-Salaam. This turned out to be a major obstacle as the only person who was able to issue the certificate was away from the office most of the time and about to leave the country on a longer journey. After two days of siege he finally turned up, and we got the certificate just a couple of hours before we had to catch the plane, but then only after some confusion about how to fill in the blank under the head 'Species Name'. We could now boldly face the customs officers in the airport. That exercise turned out to be an anticlimax, when the customs officer asked to see what was in the hand luggage.

"What's in that black shoe box?"

"A couple of birds!"

"Can I see them?"

"Yes, here they are!"

"That's okay, thanks!"

Nothing else happened. The customs officers took a glance at the birds without asking for a permit. We were astonished. Could we have taken live parrots out of the country in the same manner?

Before leaving Tanzania we had arranged for Martin Woodcock to illustrate the bird for publication. After a couple of weeks of acclimatisation in Denmark we contacted Martin again in order to arrange a meeting. He needed the photos of the bird as well as the two specimens. We agreed to hand over the black shoe box in Gatwick Airport wearing full 'field-uniform' including binoculars for identification purposes as we had not seen each other before. As an extra precaution we further agreed on bringing wife and girlfriends respectively to give the customs officers, civil police and the Aliens Division of the Home Office the impression that the exotic avian pair were not illegal immigrants.

We were delayed an hour on arrival, but afterwards everything passed smoothly through hand luggage, customs and passport checks. Approaching the final exit we were all looking for a married birder-couple and suddenly we saw a tall deep-chested man with a prominent black supercilium and, most important to us, binoculars present. He waved his hand and as we waved back we saw a short woman beside him waving her binoculars: they were definitely our contacts! The 'goods' were handed over to enable Martin to paint the small, aberrant bird before we left England.

Meanwhile we had the chance to check the skin collection in Tring. We found none of the francolins to be like this new species. The closest were the two small forest-adapted species Nahan's and Latham's Francolins *F. nahani* and *F. lathami*. However, they were also far from being similar. The fact that we had to work more than a year to solve the phylogenetic affinities within the taxonomically messy Phasianidae is another story.

The new species turned out to be a new genus with its closest relatives to be found among the hill-partridges in Southeast Asia. It must be considered a relict form dating at least 15 million years back in time when there was a continuous forest cover through the Middle East and North Africa. The Eastern Arc Forests in Tanzania have been under continuous favourable climatic conditions influenced by the Indian Ocean and are probably 30 million years old or more. Therefore these forests serve as 'elephant graveyards' for old relict forms as well as speciation centres for new radiations which speciate during unfavourable dry conditions. The description, a more detailed systematic discussion and Martin Woodcock's painting can be seen in the January 1994 issue of *Ibis*.

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